Landscape struggles, environmental hegemonies and the politics of urban design

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What would a Central Park designed by proletarians look like? How would such a subaltern landscape differ from the creatures of nineteenth-century bourgeois pastoral taste that we have come to identify with urban nature? Would Manhattan's structure and social space have been radically changed by such a historical detour?

Landscape and New York City scholars are familiar with the demands and proposals of various working-class groups and organs during and following the creation of the park. A system of green and open spaces in Lower Manhattan and other sites near workplaces and poor neighborhoods would have replaced the idea of a grand park located in a then suburban area. Design would have prioritized content over form, fostering active uses of space, sports and other modes of physical culture and sensuous entertainment as opposed to the passive, ocularcentrist experience promoted by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. And, of course, instead of the decorous and restrained regime of publicity implicit in their plan, the new green spots in town would have become another opportunity for collective celebration, merry dancing, heavy drinking and political agitation, a natural extension to the convivial space of nineteenth-century streets and saloons in popular districts.

Fig. 1. Mulberry Street in Lower Manhatthan, c. 1900, one of the spots where the teeming urban life against which Central Park had been conceived four decades earlier was still ongoing. Source: Detroit Publishing Co. – Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, cph.3g04637.

These aspects, however, constitute a deceptive or, at least, insufficient response to the inquiries above. Design arrangements and planning decisions have a structural capacity to determine everyday life, but their agency is also contingent and elusive; new conjunctures and their shifting balances of forces can easily reverse its political implications. Aware of the limitations of previous strategies of social control, bourgeois reform appropriated many of the aforementioned proposals and reframed them in its own agenda a few decades after the inception of Central Park, creating more dynamic but closely monitored small parks and playgrounds in working-class neighborhoods, in New York City and across the US. A more nuanced elucidation of the problematic agency of design, therefore, is needed. In a recent piece in *Society and Space* I suggest that an effective understanding of the politics of landscape architecture and urban planning requires that we uncover how their techniques, spatial models and socioecological representations are captured and constantly reimagined in relentless struggles to forge environmental hegemonies, where the meaning and agency of urban configurations are outcomes of historically specific confrontations rather than a priori conditions of morphological or programmatic choices.

As with any form of hegemony, these struggles incorporate projects of subjectivation and trigger governmental transformations that not only affect the state's inner institutional structure, but also generate a new regulatory topography, reorganizing and disseminating the loci of agency in the realm of civil society, beyond conventional administrative apparatuses. Given their focus on the interpretation of power through such processes, Antonio Gramsci's and Michel Foucault's contributions constitute particularly helpful intellectual resources to unpack these articulations of design, subjectivity, environment and state change. The companion article promenades both authors through the secluded walks and broad alleys of Central Park's early days in order to illustrate this problematic with a paradigmatic case in the history of our urban present. Amongst other parallels in their work, Gramsci and Foucault took an explicitly instrumental interest in historical narratives, mobilizing the past as a means to rethink their time in political terms. In that sense, they provide inspiration for a countergenealogy of planning and landscape architecture that exposes the entanglement of techniques and design tools in a vortex of social factions, institutional agencies, state strategies and class collisions.

I want to extend a somewhat subterranean tradition of attempts to create space for productive dialogue between these authors, taking advantage of the now available full Foucauldian corpus from the early to mid-1970s, especially *La société punitive*, a course replete with Marxisant undertones. While not attempting to 'Marxicize' Foucault, I find the class connotations and the trajectory of his reflections about governmental structures during this period extremely useful to re-centralize his theories of power and subject formation around state spaces. In many aspects, the task with Gramsci is the reverse. These maneuvers may sound heretical or violent at first, but as the article shows the preoccupations, topics and sometimes even particular formulations both authors provide resonate with each other in unexpected ways.

The avalanche of secondary literature addressing their work suggests that Gramsci and Foucault remain open-ended territories due to their legacy's partially unsettled, exploratory nature, as exemplified by the tragically sequestered indagations of the *Quaderni del carcere*, or the laboratory of courses at the Collège de France. Laden with corrections and reformulations—and sometimes also with contradictions and inconsistencies—these materials ask for equally experimental approaches and developments. The complementarities and tensions between their respective analyses provide an opportunity for creative interplay, revealing higher valences for fruitful exchange in lines of reasoning that depart from the standard portraits orthodox exegeses offer. For instance, amongst other strategies my article brings these authors to a common ground by focusing on Gramsci's

notion of 'integral state'—a category that encompasses but is at the same time more fertile and dynamic in its dialectical quality than the traditional civil society/political society dualism—and reconsidering Foucault's intuitions about the changing position of the state as a protean but fundamental element in diverse historical modes of agency, against the overemphasis on his observations about the dispersion of power mechanisms.

In their tentative condition, these research forays should be taken as heuristic, necessarily partial, ad hoc condensations of broader conceptual assemblages around concrete problems of analysis. In that sense, the crucial test for such theoretical drills is, in my opinion, how they help us to see differently. Four problems are especially relevant for subsequent application in an overtly political reappraisal of Central Park and landscape struggles more generally:

a) the forging of new state-forms through the implementation of practices of government beyond conventional regulatory apparatuses;
b) normalization and the attempt to homogenize common sense as public sphere foundations that secure hegemony and ease the conduct of social conducts;
c) the emergence of pedagogical power and new techniques to fulfill these strategies, combining liberal and disciplinary interpellations that take subjects as targets of moral reform;
d) the political mobilization of built environments and landscape as governmental technologies and the development of environmental hegemonies at the local scale as a means to stabilize social order.

These notions—'pedagogical spaces', 'environmental hegemony', and so forth—expand the usually implicit spatialities in Gramsci's and Foucault's work with a more explicit design declension that helps to situate its material agency as a trigger and mediator of processes of subjectivation and statehood restructuring. They provide an opportunity to think the development of state and power formations through the lens of planned urbanization rather than the other way around. From this perspective certain transformations in the evolution of local governmentalities can be framed as an effect of the drive to produce such hegemonies and spaces, to regulate regimes of public behavior, to control landscape as both representation and practice.

For instance, the Central Park scheme's attempt to compose a co-opted conviviality appears as the vehicle for a Gramscian passive revolution that mobilized spatial techniques to forge a particular sense of social order and public hierarchy, investing design with a political substance which is often ignored or underestimated in existing analyses of the Greensward project. A new combination of disciplinary and liberal strategies of subjectivation was afoot, scattered in an array of modes and sites of agency—from design itself to representational devices, from security forces to the school system and the press—which, albeit dispersed, remained connected to the project of a core elite group that aspired to reshape Manhattan's political centrality.

The new state-form rested upon mechanisms for the production and control of public space such as fiscal policy, urban police or state propaganda, which experienced crucial development in this initiative. But it was landscape architecture, of course, which underwent the most obvious regulatory advancement. If the classic interpretation conceives landscape as a mode of representing not only our relationship with nature, but also the articulation of social order in a particular environment, Central Park constituted, in a rather literal sense, an architecture of landscape—an attempt to spatialize the order implicit in a chain of symbolic representations of social intercourse and human engagement with nature that precluded active interplay of subjects with each other and

their physical milieu, promoting instead a passive form of urban experience. The design, regulation, vigilance and visualizations of the park formed an apparatus intended to inhibit certain modes of interaction in/with public space that were dominant in the streets of popular Gotham at that time.

Fig. 2. A proletarian 'park': German workers exercise during a Turnfest at Jones's Wood, the site where Central Park was initially planned to be located, later transformed into a picnic ground with adjoining beer gardens. The festival combined athletic competitions with concerts, popular theater and exhibitions. Source: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 1, 1864.

It could be argued that such a reterritorialization requires a hegemonic agency that precedes, orients and demarcates the horizon of landscape architecture, a political scaffolding that predates the emergence of its instruments and procedures—even critical designers tend to embrace this reading so as to alleviate the burden of responsibility on their techniques. Instead, working from a Gramscian-Foucauldian viewpoint suggests that hegemony is produced around such material investments, through the very inception of new techniques and their programmatic maneuvers: in this case, the attempt to spatially delineate a political ecology of public pleasures in which everybody belongs so long as they acquiesce and reproduce the modes of access to nature and public appearance of an emerging normative class. From this perspective, hegemony is the result of environmental battles that refigure the nexus between subjects and regulatory apparatuses in the effort of certain social blocs to present their own visions of socionatures as commonsensical landscapes. The inception of Central Park can be read as a leap forward in this type of struggles. It constituted the response of a fraction of the local bourgeoisie to the challenge of a working class that, at a time of political and economic turmoil, began to organize specifically proletarian institutions and proposed alternative urbanisms, amongst others by connecting shop-floor and neighborhood grievances and resistance. This explicitly political appraisal of landscape and urbanization is, in my opinion, closer to reality—and, I believe, much more inspiring for current antagonistic practices and landscape struggles—than conventional accounts that see the park as the autonomous brainchild of an aesthetic or sanitary sensibility, or as a mere instrument for the

economic or sensual benefit of the elites, a goal for which there were other, much more lucrative and easier to manage alternatives at hand during this period.

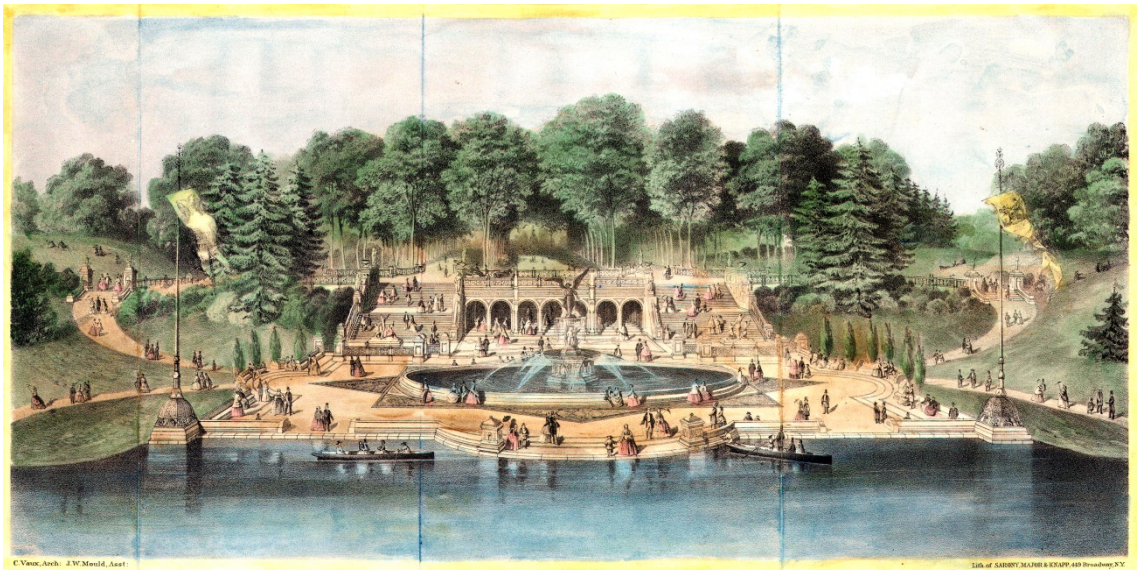

Fig. 3. Knapp View of Bethesda Terrace, 1869, one amongst many contemporary representations of Central Park as an orderly, decorous landscape open for all but fostering passive recreation. Source: Sarony, Major & Knapp.

If politics is a war to stabilize collective meanings that prescribe how to live in common, urban landscapes—as representations and practices of a certain socioecological order—constitute battlefields where contending visions of the city fight for a symbolic and material definition of modes of interaction with, and in, public natures. The debates surrounding the creation of Central Park, for instance, confronted a contemplative/representational upper-class regime and a performative/non-representational popular imagination, each with its particular distribution of practices, imaginations and affects attached to landscape.

A truly effective critique, however, should go beyond the mere identification of a fray between passive and active visions of our rapport with environment. As I have mentioned later developments in landscape architecture and urban planning demonstrated that, from a subaltern viewpoint, the problem was not only to provide a more dynamic set of activities for park visitors, including sports, games, etc. The deeper conflict, as in any political confrontation, was rather who ran those activities, and for whom; who controlled the social meaning of space, the figuration of nature, and so on. What was left out of subsequent schemes for small parks and playgrounds in New York City and other budding metropolises—besides booze, games of chance and revolutionary banners—was the possibility of a popular self-management of these precincts, similar to that which existed in informal periurban picnics and commercial beer gardens akin to the working-class saloon.

From this perspective, we could reformulate the opening questions with more politically incisive queries. How would urban governmentalities and state structures have changed had Central Park been organized by workers? How would the histories of current regimes of publicity in and beyond New York City have been transformed by such a landscape revolution? And what sort of design knowledges and planning strategies would emerge from that field of forces? Difficult as they may be, these interrogations are worth considering, not only for historians but also for designers and

political scientists concerned with current dynamics of urbanization. The answers can help us to radically transform our urban futures.

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